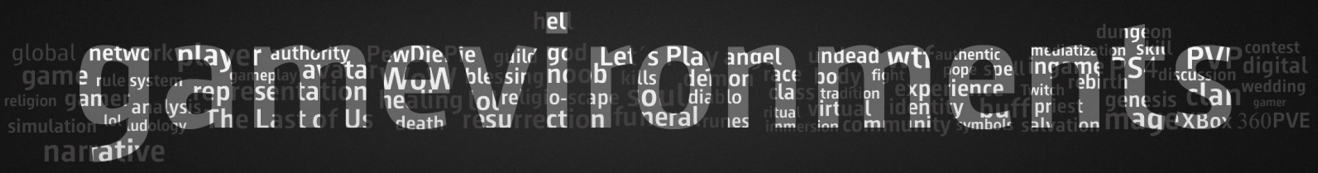

gamevironments

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articles

reviews

interviews

research reports

Religion, Games, and Othering: An Intersectional Approach

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the medium is technologically capable of an infinite number of representations nowadays, video games still frequently resort to simplistic, ideologized and stereotypical portrayals of characters as well as virtual environments. Binary othering constructions of race, gender, national, cultural or religious identities are common modes of representation in any genre. I argue that in many instances religious identity as an excluding and marginalizing element only becomes visible in all its complexity when examined intersectionally, meaning in relation to other categories of difference. This article explores how religion can function as an element of othering in video game representations and how it appears as such in relation to other categories of difference. This is investigated by looking at the example of representations of Islam and the Middle East in contemporary military shooters, specifically in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012). Taking metaludic discourses into account (Ensslin 2012, 9), the article concludes with an examination of comments on YouTube-Walkthroughs to investigate whether the othering representations observed in the game are also perceived as such by gamers.

Keywords: othering, intersectionality, Islam, Middle East, race ,nationality, discourse analysis, gamer discourse, YouTube

Introduction

In *The Language of Gaming*, Astrid Ensslin observes how "social, political and cultural meanings" (2012, 35) are generated and reproduced through games and their semiotic properties, and how discourse analysis can be a useful approach for the examination of such content. One of her key observations is that "ideologies in the sense of personal and institutional belief systems permeate all aspects and layers of discourse" (8). Hence, as human-made media products, video games are – just like any other form of mediated discourse – "far from neutral" (Everett 2005, 323). This

can be observed in the case of cultural, gendered, political, racial, and – as I will argue – religious othering of characters as well as virtual geographies within games. It can also be observed with regard to the reception and re-mediation of the othering in question.

This article examines the question of religion as an othering element in games in terms of its various intersections with other categories of difference, such as race, gender, nationality, or culture. In the course of this investigation, I will analyze representations within games and touch on gamer reception of such representations using the example of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*. The first section of this article provides a brief introduction to the theoretical and methodological foundation of my research concerning my approach to analyzing ideological content in video games. This is followed by a general overview of (religious) othering in video game representations and an investigation of how intersectionality can be a useful approach to analyzing such depictions. The specific context in which I chose to illustrate this phenomenon is the representation of Islam in contemporary military shooters, with a specific focus on the game *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012). Next, the article examines the question of whether the othering representations of Islam observed are also recognized as such by gamers, and, if so, whether they are approved of or criticized. For this purpose, comments on YouTube-Walkthroughs of the game were analyzed. Special attention was given to the question of whether the intersections of religion and other categories of difference observed in the game's representations also played a role in gamer-discourse.

Theoretical and Methodological Remarks

Addressing video games with the research question and perspective outlined in the introduction assumes a perception of the medium as reflecting, evoking, and embedded in multiple layers of discourse. This multidimensional discursivity of video games (Ensslin 2012, 6) can be observed, on the one hand, with regard to a game's reciprocal relation to overall sociocultural discourses, and, on the other hand, concerning the multiple representational and communicational dimensions of a game (narrative, audiovisuality, spatiality, gameplay, etc.), as well as the communicative practices that it elicits. Therefore, I understand games firstly as constituted by their multimodality, and secondly, in a constant discursive relation of reciprocal influence towards their social, cultural, historical, and ideological context(s). For this reason, when analyzing games, particularly with regard to the way certain ideologies and hegemonies are enacted in and through them, it is always crucial to take their specific discursive embedding into account. As Ensslin elaborates, "there is more to the meaning of video games than just the game itself and its specific textual make-up. What is equally important is the way in which games draw on and relate to other texts and discourses surrounding them" (2012, 5-6). This statement can be understood in different ways: with a focus on the game itself, it can mean that a comprehensive analysis not only entails the examination of rhetorical means (linguistic as well as extra-linguistic), the audiovisuality, the narrative, the gameplay, etc. *within* a particular game, but also an investigation of the producers, the gamer discourse surrounding the product, as well as the (partly) institutionally-driven medial discourses concerning the game in question. Due to the fact that games are "'played' rather than 'read', 'watched' or 'listened to'" (Ensslin 2012, 25), Ensslin argues that text and reader cannot be thought of as separate units. In short, she refers to the need for an examination of not only the various modes of representation and communication *of* the game itself, but, beyond that, of communication *about* the game, the

metaludic discourses (9). Ensslin's initial statement can also be understood in an even broader sense. For example, according to Vít Šisler, an analysis of representations of Islam in video games can only be sufficient if it contextualizes them "in a broader (narrative) structure that covers Islam in news and popular media" as they "do not circulate in a 'ludological vacuum'" (2006, 86). With this approach, one not only moves outside the boundaries of the game itself, but also transcends the discourse sector of video games altogether, hence emphasizing reciprocal discursive influences.

To summarize, my approach to analyzing othering based on religious ascriptions within video games is (critical) discourse analysis, where I emphasize the importance of acknowledging, first and foremost, the multimodality of the medium also in terms of the various layers of discourse surrounding it. Furthermore, I understand the relationship of games and overall societal discourse as reciprocal, meaning that certain ideologies and hegemonies that are reflected in video game representations are also consolidated (or sometimes subverted) by this mediation – or re-mediation when it comes to their negotiations in terms of gamer discourse.

(Religious) Othering and Intersectionality in Video Games

Despite the fact that today's technology allows for infinite possible representations, video games still frequently resort to simplistic, ideologized and stereotypical portrayals of characters as well as virtual environments. As argued above, games are, of course, always embedded in a specific sociocultural context and can therefore never be regarded as free from ideologies or hegemonies. Thus, certain culturally embedded stereotypes and discourses of marginalization are naturally reflected in video game representations. Moreover, one needs to keep in mind that games are primarily products, meaning that the main objective is (usually) to sell them. In this

context, Ensslin observes that "the dictates of neoliberalism are very much at play when it comes to simplifying differences and othering amongst in-game characters" (2012, 35). Binary constructions of race, gender, national, political, cultural or religious identities are common modes of representation in video games and therefore require critical investigation.

When it comes to analyzing how such dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', 'friend' and 'foe', are constructed and mediated, particularly with regard to their (reciprocal) relation to overall societal discourses, the conceptual framework of othering is very useful. Othering refers to "differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between 'us' and 'them'. In this understanding of othering power is always employed in representing other and self" (Dervin 2015, 2). The verb-form of the term already hints at one of its major characteristics – its processual nature. Boundaries between the self and the supposed other are not naturally given but created, meaning that the other is *turned into* the other (Dervin 2015, 2). There are various identity markers that can be the foundation of othering a group of people(s), such as race, gender, sexuality, nationality, political conviction, or – as I will elaborate later on – religious identity. Creating dichotomies between social groups based on one or any number of such identity markers not only serves to marginalize the other, but also very significantly reinforces hegemonic notions of the self. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism*, "[t]he construction of identity […] involves the construction of opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from 'us'" (2003, 332). Identification via othering also plays a significant role in video games in terms of "distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery" (Langer 2008, 87). As Ensslin elaborates, "this semiotic process of othering happens frequently in video games discourse through perpetuating cultural and

political stereotypes of the 'enemy'" (2012, 54). Rendering opposing forces as radically different from the self through stereotypical characterizations not only helps consolidate the identity of one's own faction, but also justifies various forms of invasions or attacks on the other.

However, as noted earlier, othering in video games is not limited to representations of characters. In terms of the virtual geographies represented, the gamespaces depicted can also be subject to othering. As medial expressions of what Edward Said coined *imaginative geographies* (2003, 54-55) – "the projection of images of identity and difference on to geographical space" (Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin 2014, 930) – the virtual environments of video games also frequently reflect encoded discourses of othering. This has been investigated by several scholars in different contexts, as, for instance, regarding the othering representation of the Middle East in video games (Höglund 2008, Šisler 2006, 2008, 2014, Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, Graham 2006, Power 2007, Shaw 2009) or the perception of colonized spaces in real-time-strategy games or construction simulations (Magnet 2006, Douglas 2002, Salter 2011). It is important to note that neither the othering of such mediatized imaginative geographies, nor of the in-game characters, can necessarily only be seen on a single representational 'layer' of a video game as, for example, narrative or audiovisuality. Rather, such othering can be encoded in several dimensions of a game, which, as argued in the theoretical remarks, should all be taken into account for a comprehensive analysis. Othering can also occur in the multiple discourses that games elicit, meaning in the communication about them, or, particularly in the case of MMORPGs, the gamer communication within them. For instance, Leigh Schwartz (2006) and Jessica Langer (2008) have both made the observation that, in the case of *World of Warcraft,* a certain reinforcement of stereotypes represented in the racialized depiction of in-game characters and, consequently, discrimination and bigotry, also play a significant

role in gamer interaction on RP-PvP servers. The question of how othering discourses within video games are perceived by the gamers, whether they are appropriated as in this case, critically challenged, subverted, or maybe not perceived as such at all is of course a crucial one, which will be further investigated at a later point in this article.

Most scholarly investigations of othering in video games so far have dealt with issues of race (Everett 2005, 2008, Langer 2008, Leonard 2003, 2006, Schwartz 2006, Williams et al. 2009). For instance, the aforementioned works by Leigh Schwartz (2006) and Jessica Langer (2008) both examine racial othering in *World of Warcraft*. Comparing the construction and representation of the two opposing factions' races – those of the Alliance with those of the Horde – Langer notes that "all of the Alliance races are depicted as either Western or Western-approved, whereas the Horde races are depicted very much as the Other" (2008, 90). She identifies correspondences between several Horde races and real-world cultures and ethnicities, and explains that "the depictions of subaltern cultures to be found in *World of Warcraft* are not nuanced representations; rather, they are processed, generalized cultural memes, thrown in to give each race its own flavor" (Langer 2008, 91). This othering and marginalizing depiction of the Horde peoples leaves no doubt that "the Alliance are 'us' in this war" (Schwartz 2006, 319). However, one might wonder how this concept holds up when the gamer chooses to play as a member of a Horde race and therefore identify with the Horde to a certain degree. Does this subvert its notion of otherness or does the mere option of siding with the marginalized already do so? David Leonard (2003) makes an interesting observation concerning this issue. He identifies a certain voyeuristic gaze in becoming the other, which very much reflects colonialist endeavors of appropriation (Leonard 2003, 4). Thus, he invalidates any assumption of the colorblindness of digital media. Rather, one can speak of consuming the other (Leonard 2003), an act which is not colorblind merely because

the player has the option to play with an avatar of a different ethnicity or gender than one's own. To summarize, there is a certain ambiguity to becoming the other in games: Video games make it possible to experience the other, which (usually) entails a certain degree of identification with the role; yet, at the same time, this identity is primarily constituted by stereotypes.

Compared to racial issues, representations of religious identity as othering elements have received far less attention. Some authors have investigated the othering of Islam in games (Šisler 2006, 2008, 2014, Höglund 2008, de Riso 2013), a topic that I will elaborate on in the next section. However, religion as a category of othering in video games has not been widely discussed so far, and when it has been, the conversation has been brief. This may seem somewhat surprising, as there are many examples of such encoded othering discourses aside from portrayals of Islam. Let us return to the example of *World of Warcraft* once more. As Leigh Schwartz observes, "[i]n the American *World of Warcraft*, the more Western faction is learned, sophisticated, and religious, whereas the other faction is tribal, spiritual, and struggles to overcome a dark cultural history" (2006, 321). Thus religion obviously serves as an important element in the characterization of the respective races, signifying their degree of development, a notion that is understood in a very linear sense. For instance, the Horde race of the trolls in *World of Warcraft* strongly resembles colonial depictions of black Caribbean culture (Langer 2008, 97). They are assigned their own religion, "a simplified and Westernized version of the Afro-Caribbean religious tradition of Voudoun (often spelled "voodoo"), [which] is presented as sinister" (Langer 2008, 94). The common colonial Western perception of this tradition as dark, mysterious and savage (Bishop 2008) is reflected in many popular media depictions of black Caribbean and particularly of New Orleans culture, from early Zombie films to recent television series such as *American Horror Story:*

Coven (2013). The marginalizing and othering depiction of the trolls and their religion in *World of Warcraft* can also be understood in this context.

It becomes apparent that the portrayal of the trolls' religion mainly serves to reinforce a particular atmosphere, supposed authenticity (Langer 2008, 91), or actually rather a certain racial stereotype – in this case that of the black Caribbean. This example illustrates a very important point concerning religion as a category of othering in video games. It shows that in many cases othering based on religious ascriptions appears in direct relation to other categories of social difference – in this case, race. This notion of overlapping categories of difference, and hence, marginalization, is what gender studies has coined 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989, Collins 1998). Intersectionality is a crucial concept "[i]n order to complexify our understanding and analysis of othering" (Dervin 2015, 6) and, according to David Leonard, "[an] important step that game studies must undertake" (2006, 85). With regard to the subject of this article, this means that religious identity as an excluding and marginalizing element in video games often only becomes visible in all its complexity when examining its relation to other categories of difference, such as race, gender, nationality, political convictions, culture, etc. This is an important observation for further analysis because religion as an element of othering – or religion in general – is not always presented as such explicitly in video games, but often appears implicitly.

Markus Wiemker and Jan Wysocki identify three different ways that religion is used in games (2014, 206-208): firstly, religion can function "as a background to heighten the authenticity or to create a special atmosphere of a game" (206) without having much of an impact on story or gameplay. Secondly, it can take on a more explicit role in terms of steering the narrative or having an effect on the gameplay. Thirdly, games

can contain a "dominant description of religious issues with the aim to inform, influence, or convince players about beliefs, doctrines, practices etc. of certain religions and to deliver the possibility for gamers with a certain religious background to find their own beliefs portrayed in a game" (207). The example given above, the representation of the trolls' religion in *World of Warcraft*, undoubtedly falls into the first of these categories, as it mainly serves to strengthen and reinforce a particular image of the racialized culture in which it is embedded. I argue that especially in cases where religion and its othering appear mainly as an accessory to further characterization of a specific geographical, historical, or cultural setting, their particular function within the game becomes visible primarily by their intersections with other categories of social difference. I will illustrate this further in the following section by analyzing othering representations of Islam and the imaginative geography of the Middle East in recent US-American military shooters, with special regard to their intersections with racial and cultural othering.

Representations of the Arab and Muslim Other in War Games

Since the 1980s, stylized depictions of the Middle East have been popularly and frequently included in video games of different genres. Action and platform games such as *The Magic of Scheherazade* (1989), *Prince of Persia* (1989) or *Disney's Aladdin* (1993) all share a historical setting inspired by the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The representations of the Orient and its inhabitants mediated through these games therefore often mirror classical Orientalist imagery on various layers of representation (Šisler 2008, 206, Reichmuth and Werning 2006, 46). "These [patterns] include motifs such as headscarves, turbans, scimitars, tiles and camels, character concepts such as caliphs, Bedouins, djinns, belly dancers and Oriental topoi such as deserts, minarets, bazaars and harems" (Šisler 2008, 207). One can observe an

othering of the imaginative geography of the exotic Orient, which is seemingly detached from modernity, as well as of the people assigned to this semi-mythical space based on Orientalist stereotypes. Religion does not play a significant role in the othering of these virtual geographies or characters. It is sometimes present on a visual level in an ornamental sense, reinforcing a certain authenticity of the depicted gamespace, yet it is usually not part of the narratives, nor does it have any impact on the gameplay. However, what is interesting about these games and their representations is that cultural othering in the form of Orientalist stereotypes appears in two forms: as disparaging – for instance regarding the notion of Arabic cruelty and barbarism (Šisler 2008, 207) – as well as quasi-affirmative or romantic at the same time.

In the aftermath of the events of 9/11, a certain shift can be observed in this respect. US-American video game productions after 9/11 that are set in the Middle East in particular mostly fall into the first-person shooter genre, particularly the military shooter subgenre. Games like *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2005), *Battlefield 2* (2005), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Medal of Honor* (2010), *Battlefield 3* (2011), or *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (2012) are only a few of many examples. Even though games with narratives centered around modern conflict in Middle Eastern countries could also be found before 9/11 –for instance *Southern Command* (1981), *War in the Gulf* (1993), or *Delta Force* (1998) – the ratio between non-conflict-centered games and conflict-centered games depicting the Middle East and partly Islam has changed since 2001, particularly with regard to US-American productions. When reviewing game releases of the past 15 years, which are set in the Middle East or deal with this geographical space and/or the Islamic religion on some level, it quickly becomes apparent that military-themed first or third person shooters constitute the largest part of this corpus by far. As we are dealing with a specific genre, this of course does

not mean that *all* depictions of Muslims and/or the Middle East within US-American video games since 9/11 are constructions of a stereotypical enemy. There are a few notable examples outside the genre of the military shooter, for instance, Altair in *Assassin's Creed* (2007) or Faridah Malik in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), where this is definitely not the case. However, in terms of numbers these representations are rather the exception than the norm as they are not part of the majority of games depicting Muslims and the Middle East since 9/11 with regard to genre and themes.

In the post-9/11 military shooter, the settings are no longer historical or mythical but rather contemporary, and, first and foremost, characterized by conflict – as the genre suggests of course. In conjunction with the very different settings of these games compared to the earlier exoticized examples from the 1980s and 1990s, a certain shift can also be observed regarding the mechanisms of othering embedded within them. The aforementioned occasional quasi-affirmative or romanticized othering of the Middle East in the rhetoric of *One Thousand and One Nights* is no longer present in these games. What is interesting, however, is that religion, namely, Islam, seems to appear more frequently in the post-9/11 military shooter set in the Middle East than in their action and platform counterparts from the 1980s and 1990s – and also partly in other contexts. Within recent military shooters, Islam as a category of othering shows significant intersections with other delimiting identity markers, in particular, race, culture, and nationality. All of these categories need to be taken into account because together they constitute the image of a stereotypical enemy, which these games presuppose, mediate, and perpetuate through various representational modes. I would like to briefly outline some of the basic characteristics shared by these games before going into more detail with the example of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*.

In the abovementioned games, the player usually takes on the role of a member (or several members) of the US Army and engages in military operations which are mostly connected to the War on Terror. The virtual operations of the examples given are all set entirely or at least partially in the Middle East. Some of the games refer to actual locations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iraq, whereas others are set in fictional countries or cities which are nevertheless based on (a certain depiction of) these real states, including, for instance, the fictional yet overtly Muslim nation of Zhekistan in *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Höglund 2008) or the unnamed oil-rich Middle Eastern country in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Höglund 2009). According to the nature of the genre, the virtual geographies that are depicted as Middle Eastern are mainly represented as sites of military action. They appear as locations of perpetual war (Höglund 2008), places of utter chaos and disorder that require military intervention (King and Leonard 2010, 100). While moving through these virtual Middle Eastern cities, the player frequently passes mosques and minarets, which sometimes not only serve as visual signifiers of Islam, but are also actively integrated into the gameplay (Šisler 2014, 117). However, in most cases architectural landmarks that refer to Islam are primarily important stylistic devices that reinforce a certain authenticity or expectation of the depicted space, and furthermore emphasize the otherness of the imaginative geography of the Middle East.

Figure 1: "Backstab" map in *Battlefield 2*

Another characteristic shared by the abovementioned games is that the only characters which can be encountered in these virtual battlefields are usually either force comrades or enemies. As King and Leonard explain, "with the exception of a few instances, the majority of games transporting players onto the battlefields of the Global War on Terror do so in absence of civilians, living cities, or civilization" (2010, 100). Therefore, in terms of gameplay, the only possible interaction the games allow between the player and the people assigned to the Middle Eastern gamespace is usually military violence (Höglund 2008). To put it bluntly: you shoot them or they shoot you. Iconographically, the stereotypical enemy that is assigned to the Middle Eastern gamespace mostly appears "as a set of schematized attributes which refer to Arab Muslims – head cover, loose clothes, dark skin color, and so on. […] The in-game narrative then links these visual signifiers to international terrorism or Islamic extremism" (Šisler 2014, 116). Thus, the enemy is portrayed in a racialized, stereotypical, generalizing manner that evokes associations with Islam primarily due

to the presupposed inherent connection between the geographical setting, Arab culture, and Muslims.

As indicated by Šisler's quote above, the narrative dimension of the games often reinforces this association, further connecting it to terrorism. Similar to the Muslim identity of the enemies the player encounters, the Islamist background of the terrorism or extremism around which the narratives are centered is often not addressed in detail, or sometimes, not mentioned explicitly at all. Rather, the games presuppose a certain popular geopolitical imagination of the War on Terror (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007), which automatically connects these dots. This simplified perception of Muslims, the Middle East, Arabs and anti-Western terrorism as basically one entity is mirrored in many post-9/11 popular media texts, also outside the discourse sector of games. A prominent example is the very successful television series *Homeland* (2011–). At the beginning of the series, the plot revolves around Nicholas Brody, a U.S. Marine Sergeant who returns to the US after eight years of being held in captivity by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, during which he has converted to Islam. In the narrative of the series, his conversion is taken as proof of his proximity to anti-American-terrorism (Kienzl 2014, 231). Even though the component of ethnicity is not present in this particular example, the persistent tendency to equate Islam, terrorism and the Middle East can be seen.

One of the cases in which this equation is also quite explicit is *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*. The 14th installment of the *Medal of Honor* series is a direct sequel to *Medal of Honor* (2010) which was the first game from the franchise not set during the Second World War. The game, developed by *Danger Close Games* and published by *EA*, was both a commercial and critical failure, scoring 4 out of 10 points on IGN (Dyer 2012). It was criticized particularly harshly for various technical failures, as well

as for its generic, uninteresting plot in the single-player-campaign (Dyer 2012). Like its 2010 prequel, *Warfighter* is centered around the global War on Terror. According to *EA,* the game is "inspired by real world threats" and "delivers an aggressive, gritty, and authentic experience that puts gamers in the boots of today's most precise and disciplined warrior" (EA). In the following section, I will examine how Islam and the Middle East are othered throughout the game on various representational levels, and how they relate to other categories of difference. For this purpose, I will focus on the single-player-campaign, as it is given a richer narrative than the multiplayer missions.

The plot of the single-player-campaign revolves around the threat of a Pakistan-based international terror network under the leadership of a man called The Cleric. Throughout the game, the player usually assumes the role of the American elite soldier Tom "Preacher", however, there are a few exceptions. In the first mission, entitled *Through the Eyes of Evil* and set in south-west Yemen, the player takes on the role of "Agyrus", an undercover agent from the US Army, and has to complete a short terrorist training under the Cleric's supervision. In terms of gameplay, the purpose of this mission is of course for the player to become acquainted with the mechanics of the game. Nevertheless, this short sequence also reinforces notions of self and otherness based on various identity markers and through various modes of representation, including, for instance the visual appearance of the Cleric, which indicates a clear association with a specific cultural and geographical sphere.

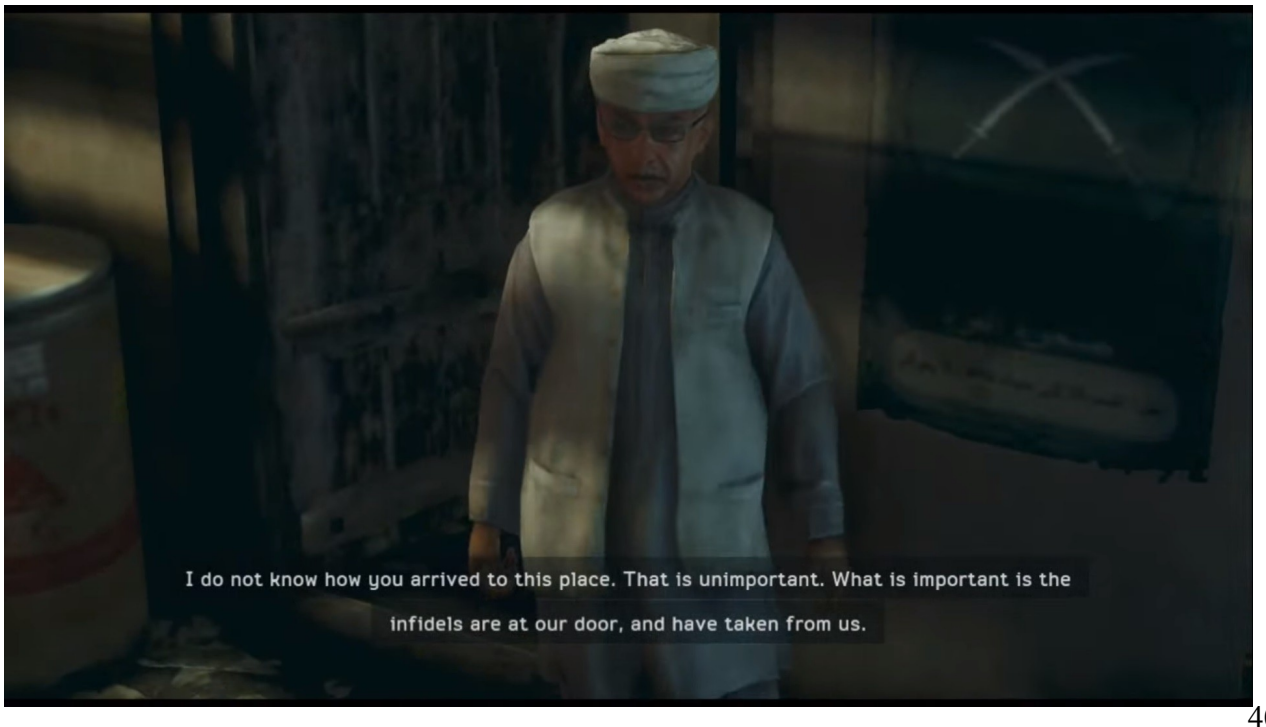

Figure 2: The Cleric in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*

Before Agyrus begins the training, the Cleric informs him of their cause in Arabic: 的 do not know how you arrived to this place. That is unimportant. What is important is the infidels are at our door, and have taken from us. To be part of our cause you must prove worthy. We shall see. We shall see. [...] Some of you may be selected for advanced training to carry the jihad to the infidel lands. Now is the time to show your quality"(*Medal of Honor: Warfighter*). Through the use of words such as "infidels" and "jihad",the Islamist background of the Cleric's terrorist activities is made apparent to the player.

The inherent connection between terrorism, Islam and (partly) the Middle East is further reinforced throughout the 13 missions of the game, as the player is confronted with various al-Qaeda-linked networks in Somalia, Yemen, the Philippines, and Pakistan. However, the precise aims and motives of the Cleric and his forces in a political sense are not revealed to the player. It seems more as though the enemy is

mainly driven by irrational hatred and that their primary aim is to spread chaos (Schulze von Glaßer 2012, 16). This ascribed "irrational violence which is antithetical to Western forms of civilization" (de Riso 2013, 152) others the enemy in a cultural and racialized sense, drawing upon classical Orientalist stereotypes. Due to the connection the narrative then draws to Islam, the religion itself is also othered and rendered both menacing and inferior at the same time. This stereotypical Orientalist image of irrational, uncivilized Muslim hatred is not uncommon in popular media, and therefore by no means only to be observed in video games. It found its digital embodiment in a photograph of the so-called *Islamic Rage Boy* which became a viral internet phenomenon (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 22-30). The photograph, displaying Shakeel Ahmad Bhat, a Pakistani protester, was first released in 2007. He has since become "America's hated poster-boy of Islamic radicalism" (French 2007) with his characteristic angry and aggressive facial expression being utilized in countless internet memes. Although the irrational violence ascribed to the Muslim enemies in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* is far less blatant than in the case of *Islamic Rage Boy*, they can both be understood as continuations of the same othering stereotype across different forms of popular media.

With regard to the gamespaces of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter,* one can observe that, as in other military shooters, the Middle Eastern and other virtual cities the player encounters appear mostly as dusty spaces, seemingly unstructured, largely destroyed, and for the most part, unpopulated by civilians (Graham 2006).

Figure 3: Virtual geographies of destruction in *Warfighter*

In terms of gameplay, this last point means that all of the people who can be directly interacted with within the virtual space, aside from force comrades, are hostile and therefore need to be eliminated. In a mission entitled *Hot Pursuit,* the player engages in a car chase through different parts of the Pakistani city Karachi. At one point, the player is forced to chase the target right through a street market, a "space [that] is essentially civilian, yet there are no actual civilians around" (Höglund 2014) – or at least strangely not within the range of the racing vehicles. This absence of ordinary citizens not only characterizes the portrayed city as a "childless and (often) womanless territory occupied primarily by terrorist guerrillas" (Höglund 2008) but also impacts the moral judgment concerning urban warfare that is mediated through the game, as there are seemingly no casualties involved (King and Leonard 2010, 100).

Figure 4: A car chase through a street market in Pakistan during *Warfighter's* mission *Hot Pursuit*

Compared to other games of the same genre that share similar settings, for example, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, visual signifiers of Islam appear relatively subtly within the depicted Middle Eastern gamespaces in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*. Mosques and minarets are present, yet they are not placed in excessively prominent positions and are not actively integrated into the gameplay. Nevertheless, an inherent intersection of Islam, terrorism, and the Middle East is already established through the narrative in a much more direct manner than in other games of the same genre. Generally, one could say that the game equates Islam, Arabs, the Middle East, terrorism and Jihadist with one another in the construction of a stereotypical enemy, which consequently combines religious, ethnic, national and political ascriptions of otherness. This image is contrasted by the American soldiers, who are not only portrayed as selfless war heroes, but also, as the subplot surrounding the protagonist Preacher's marriage and family suggests, as loving and devoted husbands and fathers. This depiction of soldiers as fathers and husbands is a very common trope in popular media and can –

for instance – also be observed in Hollywood films, such as Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014). This not only provides further identification for the audience, but also serves as a form of justification for the military action in question. With regard to *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, this becomes apparent in *EA*'s official description of the game, which reads: "Trying to pick up the pieces to salvage what remains of his marriage, Preacher is reminded of what he's fighting for – family" (EA). This provides a start contrast to the terrorist enemies, whose motives are not laid out explicitly.

Overall, *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* is a good example of how religion, in this case Islam, can appear as a category that characterizes the othered enemy, particularly via the in-game narrative, but also through other representational modes of the game to varying degrees. However, what is important about this is that it appears as one of multiple categories of othering – including race, nationality and culture – which are deeply interwoven and therefore all need to be taken into account in order to understand the construction of the stereotypical enemy represented. This is also significant because religion does not actually steer the narratives or noticeably impact the gameplay in most of these games. While the games sometimes establish clear associations of gamespaces, characters or plots with Islam, it often remains largely in the background, functioning mainly as a further indicator of the nation's or culture's otherness. Therefore, the role of religion in the othering of the stereotypical enemy – which can provide valuable insight into the game's underlying understanding of religion (in general or of one in particular) – can only be deduced by examining its interplay with other identity markers.

"Great, another game about shooting muslims..." - Gamer Reception

As explained in the theoretical remarks of this article, gamer discourse is a crucial part of the multidiscursivity of video games (Ensslin 2012, 5-6). In order to find out whether Islam, as it is represented in the example of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter,* is also perceived as othered by the gamers who engage with it, the comments of two different Walkthroughs on YouTube (theRadBrad 2012, MKIceAndFire 2012) were analyzed. Special attention was paid to comments which made connections between Islam and other categories of othering, as well as to the basic question of whether the game's othering rhetoric is most often reaffirmed, critically challenged, or not noticed at all by the gamers. Firstly, a context analysis, as described by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler for analyzing Let's Plays (2015, 100-140), was conducted, with a distinct focus on the comments (130-134). Details regarding the other components of Let's Plays and Walkthroughs – the video itself and the YouTubers in question – were largely omitted due to the limited scope of this article. On this basis, the comments were analyzed with regard to the research question by applying critical discourse analysis based on the explications of Siegfried Jäger (2001).

The Walkthroughs analyzed consist of ten and twelve videos, respectively. In the course of the analysis, all of the comments from all 22 videos were examined. The quantity of the comments varied greatly: while the videos by the more successful Let's Player, theRadBrad, were commented on between 142 and 4,481 times, the lesser known YouTuber, MKIceAndFire, only had between 21 and 266 comments per video. In both cases, the first videos of the respective Walkthroughs have the most comments. In both cases, almost all of the comments are in English.

There were certain tendencies with regard to content that could be observed for the

comments on both Walkthroughs. Most of the discussions revolved around graphics, gameplay-issues and comparisons of the game to *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* (the general dispute is over which of these three franchises is the best). Comments on the skills of the respective Let's Players were also very common and in most cases not necessarily laudatory, especially in the case of MKIceAndFire, who appears to be a particularly bad sniper. Discussions of the game's representation of religion or real-world-issues such as politics in general were definitely not among the main points of discussion. It did become apparent, however, that as soon as one commenter brought up the subject of Islam, many others would voice their opinions and highly emotionally-charged discussions would arise. In both Walkthroughs, the largest number of comments explicitly addressing Islam were in response to the first videos. As mentioned above, these are generally the videos which receive the most comments. In this case, however, another reason might be the specific mission that takes place at this point of the game: the abovementioned *Through the Eyes of Evil,* which features very explicit references to Islam in connection to terrorism. The analysis of the comments revealed that gamer-discussions on Islam uncovered different positions, which are somewhat balanced with regard to the number of comments. A large part of the commenters voiced critical concern about the game's misrepresentation of Muslims as terrorists and spoke out against generalizations and the injustice of this equation. Many of the critical commenters were Muslims themselves, most of them from countries that are frequently depicted quite negatively in military shooters. For instance, one commenter wrote: "Im a Muslim from Dubai and I love all people. I dont hate Christians, I dont hate Jews. Im sorry for what happened at 9/11, I really am. no one should suffer an indecent like that. so pleas dont hate on Muslims, we are people just like you and everybody else. NOT ALL MUSLIMS ARE TERRORISTS" (Eisa Mohamed). This tendency to clearly dissociate themselves from terrorist networks could be found very frequently within comments

by gamers who mentioned their Muslim and/or Middle Eastern heritage. The fact that declaring one's Muslim faith within this context of communication apparently requires an instant explanation that one does not approve of terrorist attacks such as 9/11 indicates how firmly established this stereotypical association of Islam and terrorism is in public discourse, as well as how it often goes hand in hand with discrimination.

However, Muslims or citizens of Middle Eastern countries were not the only commenters to criticize the game's stereotypical notions of Islam. In addition to pointing out the misconceived generalizations about and prejudices against Muslims, in both *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* and in Western society, the comments also explicitly criticized the way Islam is generally represented as a stereotypical enemy in FPSs. One user wrote: "Its always the Arabs/Muslims that are the bad guys eh? How about we do something other than Muslims or Russians in a modern shooter?" (Naiar93). Furthermore, another interesting observation was that many non-Muslim gamers who voiced criticism of the othering representations of Islam stated their own religious backgrounds in their comments. For instance, one commenter wrote, in response to a particularly disparaging comment on Islam: "let him be, he claim that muslims are ignorant extremists when he is a bigger ignorant himself, he is the kind of people that cant be reasoned with,by the way im Christian" (hector serrato).

Interestingly, this tendency to bring up one's own religious background as a remark was not observed in the comments that reaffirmed othering perceptions of Islam. As indicated earlier, these kinds of comments appeared roughly as often as critical ones in terms of numbers. Many commenters emphasized that, contrary to what critical voices might have said, the game's portrayal was accurate, in the sense that "most of terrorists are Muslim" (TrailitOut). Extremely polemic and offensive comments such as

"actually all muslims are fucking terrorists and I hate them cunts I hope one day the world well be with out them it well be a better place" (ayman mazin) were not the norm but they did appear. Overall, generalization seemed to be a very persistent tendency in this group of comments, as were the intersections of multiple categories of othering such as religion, race and nationality and their consequent thoughtless equation – such as "Muslims and 3rd world residents are largely interchangeable" (rahagbab) – which could be observed in most of these arguments. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that this group of comments addressing Islam reaffirmed the othering stereotypes which are mediated through the game – often even by explicitly pointing out its accuracy in representation.

One more example sheds further light on this relationship, specifically with regard to othering. One commenter wrote: "i dont know why this game gave a bad impression to people in my school and im not saying that its a bad game its just that people in my school call me a terrorist because of this game and i am from Pakistan" (Zeek HD). The fact that people are subjected to real-life discrimination due to an appropriation of the othering communicated through games not only highlights the reciprocity of the multiple layers of discourse surrounding games, but further indicates once more that, as David Leonard points out, games are by no means innocent entertainment products free from ideologies, but rather "sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating racial, gender, or national meaning" (2003, 1).

Conclusion

As Ian Bogost observed: "like all cultural artifacts, no video game is produced in a cultural vacuum. All bear the biases of their creators" (2008, 128). Due to their reciprocal relationship with societal discourse in general, video games not only bear

ideologies and biases in the sense that they mirror them, they also disseminate and consolidate them. Taking the multidiscursivity of video games, as investigated by Astrid Ensslin (2012), into account, this article has tried to illustrate how othering based on religious ascriptions can become visible through various representational layers of games as well as how this othering is perceived and re-mediated by gamers. As the examples of representations of Islam in contemporary military shooters and the case study of *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* have shown, religion as an excluding and marginalizing element often appears in direct relation to other delimiting identity markers – in this case, race, nationality and culture in particular.

Medal of Honor: Warfighter relies heavily on popular images of the War on Terror, as they can also be found within other medial texts, such as television series, films or news broadcasts. In these popular imaginations, Islam, Arabs, the Middle East, terrorism, and Jihadism are largely understood as synonymous or at least as inherently connected. As a result, the stereotypical enemy represented in the game is also characterized by religious othering; however, it would be wrong to claim that this enemy is solely constituted by such othering, as it also entails numerous other stereotypes. For this reason, I argue that it is essential to consider the intersections of various categories of othering in order to fully apprehend the role and connotation of religion as othering within a game. As the exemplary analysis of the gamer discourse has shown, the game's othering of Islam is, to a certain degree, also perceived by the gamers as such. Although it is definitely not among the main points of discussion, the subject does arise occasionally and is then, interestingly, discussed with particular regard to its intersections with other categories of difference. The stereotypes mediated by the game are appropriated and reaffirmed by some gamers at the same time as they are harshly criticized and subverted by others.

In order to be able to provide more detailed insight into how the othering of Islam and its intersections with race, nationality, culture, etc. are perceived and discussed by gamers, more extensive studies comprising larger datasets are required. Another important step for subsequent investigations regarding othering representations *within* games – particularly with regard to othering gamespaces – would be to increasingly include multi-player modes in the analyses, as Johan Höglund (2014) demonstrated with his investigation of the multi-player environment of *Battlefield 3*. When dealing with FPSs in particular, the multi-player modes are just as important as the single-player campaigns, if not more so. Furthermore, due to the fact that their plots are greatly reduced in comparison to the single-player counterpart, an analysis of FPSs' multi-player mode offers the opportunity to focus less on the narrative dimension and hence increasingly emphasize the way othering is encoded in the spatial and procedural practices of the game in question. As Höglund observed: "when narrative fades into the background, the way that space is imagined and produced in the game becomes crucial" (2014). Additionally, analyzing multi-player modes could also be fruitful with regard to an investigation of (direct and immediate) gamer discourse via TeamSpeak.

In summary, I would like to emphasize once more the importance of critical analyses of the ways in which religions are represented as the other within video games, as well as how these discourses are perceived and re-mediated. Even though it may seem that representations of religion(s) only serve as ornamental background decorations in many games, this does not mean that they do not convey any meaning or ideological content. Often, they are simply a part of a larger framework of othering, in which other elements also need to be taken into account. Therefore, I argue that critically examining these representations with regard to their intersectionality is an integral step in critical scholarship on religion and games.

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